LETTER

dated April 29, 1859

from

PETER COOPER

to the Trustees of

"THE COOPER UNION

FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF

SCIENCE AND ART"

When Peter Cooper and his wife, Sarah, on April 29, 1859, conveyed to The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art the building and property which The Cooper Union still occupies, the Deed of Trust was accompanied by a remarkable personal letter from Peter Cooper to the Trustees of the then new institution.

That letter, which embodies so fervently the warmth, the humanity, and the high ideals of Peter Cooper, is here presented, 97 years later, on the eve of a major effort to prepare The Cooper Union to enter its second century of free educational service to the people of America. Whoever reads this letter can better understand the far-reaching vision of Peter Cooper, which is fundamental to the aspirations of The Cooper Union today.

The Trustees,
THE COOPER UNION

9 October 1956

To the Trustees of "The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art."

For the useful purposes of life

GENTLEMEN, — It is to me a source of inexpressible pleasure, after so many years of continued effort, to place in your hands the title to all that piece and parcel of land bounded on the west by Fourth Avenue, and on the north by Astor Place, on the east by Third Avenue, and on the south by Seventh Street, with all the furniture, rents and income of every name and nature, to be forever devoted to the advancement of science and art, in their application to the varied and useful purposes of life.

The great object I desire to accomplish by the establishment of an institution devoted to the advancement of science and art, is to open the volume of nature by the light of truth — so unveiling the laws and methods of Deity, that the young may see the beauties of creation, enjoy its blessings, and learn to love the Being "from whom cometh every good and perfect gift."

My heart's desire is, that the rising generation may become so thoroughly acquainted with the works of nature, and the great *mystery of their own being, that they may see, feel, understand and know that there are immutable laws, designed in infinite wisdom, constantly operating for our good — so governing the destiny of*

worlds and men that it is our highest wisdom to live in strict conformity to these laws.

Inspiration of truth

My design is to establish this institution, in the hope that unnumbered youth will here receive the inspiration of truth in all its native power and beauty, and find in it a source of perpetual pleasure to spread its transforming influence throughout the world.

Believing *in* and hoping *for* such result, I desire to make this institution contribute in every way to aid the efforts of youth to acquire useful knowledge, and to find and fill that place in the community where their capacity and talents can be usefully employed with the greatest possible advantage to themselves and the community in which they live.

In order most effectually to aid and encourage the efforts of youth to obtain useful knowledge, I have provided the main floor of the large hall on the third story for a reading-room, literary exchange and scientific collections, — the walls around that floor to be arranged for the reception of books, maps, paintings and other objects of interest. And when a sufficient collection of the works of art, science and nature can be obtained, I propose that glass cases shall be arranged around the walls of the gallery of the said room, forming alcoves around the entire

floor for the preservation of the same. In the window spaces I propose to arrange such cosmoramic and other views as will exhibit in the clearest and most forcible light the true philosophy of life.

This philosophy will always show, when rightly understood and wisely applied, an inseparable connection between a course of vice and the misery that must inevitably follow. It will always show that "wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

Encourage heroic virtues

To manifest the deep interest and sympathy I feel in all that can advance the happiness and better the condition of the female portion of the community, and especially of those who are dependent on honest labor for support, I desire the Trustees to appropriate two hundred and fifty dollars yearly to assist such pupils of the Female School of Design as shall, in their careful judgment, by their efforts and sacrifices in the performance of duty to parents or to those that Providence has made dependent on them for support, merit and require such aid. My reason for this requirement is, not so much to reward as to encourage the exercise of heroic virtues that often shine in the midst of the greatest suffering and obscurity without so much as being noticed by the passing throng.

In order to better the condition of woman and to widen the sphere of female employment, I have provided seven rooms to be forever devoted to a Female School of Design, and I desire the trustees to appropriate out of the rents of the building fifteen hundred dollars annually towards meeting the expenses of said school.

It is the ardent wish of my heart that this school of design may be the means of raising to competence and comfort thousands of those that might otherwise struggle through a life of poverty and suffering.

To better their condition

It is also my desire that females belonging to the school of design shall have the use of one of the rooms not otherwise appropriated, for the purpose of holding meetings for the consideration and application of the useful sciences and arts to any of the various purposes calculated to improve and better their condition.

My hope is, to place this institution in the hands and under the control of men that will both know and feel the importance of forever devoting it, in the most effectual manner, to the moral, mental and physical improvement of the rising generation.

Desiring, as I do, to use every means to render this institution useful through all com-

ing time, and believing that editors of the public press have it in their power to exert a greater influence on the community for good than any other class of men of equal number, it is therefore my sincere desire that editors be earnestly invited to become members of the society of arts to be connected with this institution. It is my desire that editors may at all times have correct information in relation to all matters in any way connected with this institution, believing that they, as a body, will gladly contribute their mighty influence to guard the avenues of scientific knowledge from all that could mar or prevent its influence from elevating the minds and bettering the hearts of the youth of our common country. I indulge the hope that the Trustees will use their utmost efforts to secure instructors for the institution of the highest moral worth, talents and capacity, fitting them to communicate a knowledge of science in its most lovely and inviting forms.

Knowledge of science

It is my design that the General Superintendent, under the direction of the Trustees, shall take all needful care of the building, and rent all unoccupied parts of the same.

The person to be appointed as a General Superintendent should be a man of known devotion to the improvement of the young. It

will be his duty, not only to take charge of the building, but also to keep an office in the same, where persons may apply from all parts of the country for the services of young men and women of known character and qualifications to fill the various situations that may be open. It will be his duty to give, in the most kind and affectionate matter, such advice and counsel to all that may apply, as will most effectually promote their best interests through life.

Should any person ever be appointed a professor or superintendent who shall be found incompetent or unworthy of the trust, it is my earnest desire that such professor or superintendent shall be promptly removed.

It is my desire that students, on leaving the institution, shall receive a certificate setting forth their actual proficiency in any of the branches of science taught in the institution.

Encourage the young

In order to encourage the young to improve and better their condition, I have provided for a continued course of lectures, discussions and recitations in the most useful and practical sciences, to be open and free to all that can bring a certificate of good moral character from parents, guardians or employers, and who will agree on their part to conform faithfully to all rules and regulations necessary to maintain the

honor and usefulness of the institution.

To elevate our race

Believing that instruction in the science and philosophy of a true republican government, formed, as it should be, of the people and for the people, in all its operations, is suited to the common wants of our nature, and absolutely necessary to preserve and secure the rights and liberties of all; that such a government, rightly understood and wisely administered, will most effectually stimulate industry and afford the best means possible to improve and elevate our race, by giving security and value to all forms of human labor; that it is on the right understanding and application of this science, based as it is on the golden rule, that eternal principle of truth and justice that unites the individual, the community, the state and the nation in one common purpose and interest, binding all to do unto others as they would that others should do unto them: thus deeply impressed with the great importance of instruction in this branch of science, I have provided that it shall be continually taught, as of pre-eminent importance to all the great interests of mankind.

My feelings, my desires, my hopes, embrace humanity throughout the world: and, if it were in my power, I would bring all mankind to see and feel that there is an Almighty power and

To unite all in common effort

beauty in goodness. I would gladly show to all, that goodness rises in every possible degree from the smallest act of kindness up to the Infinite of all good. My earnest desire is to make this building and institution contribute in every way possible to unite all in one common effort to improve each and every human being, seeing that we are bound up in one common destiny and by the laws of our being are made dependent for our happiness on the continued acts of kindness we receive from each other.

I desire that the students of this institution may have the privilege to occupy one of the large halls once in every month, for the purpose of a lecture to be delivered by one of their number to all students and such friends as they may think proper to invite.

The monthly lecturer shall be chosen from the body of the students by a majority vote, or a committee of the students selected for that purpose. The votes shall be counted and the name of the person chosen to deliver the lecture shall be announced, and a record made in a book to be provided for that purpose, to be the property of the institution. I desire that a record be kept of the names of the president, secretary and speaker — the subject treated, and the general course of remark. A president and sec-

retary shall be chosen from the body of students by a majority vote, who shall preside at all meetings for lectures or other purposes, and whose term of service shall expire every three months, when another president and secretary shall be elected to take their places.

I require this frequent change, as I believe it to be a very important part of the education of an American citizen to know how to preside, with propriety over a deliverative assembly.

The means to remove evils

It is my desire, also, that the students shall have the use of one of the large rooms (to be assigned by the trustees) for the purpose of useful debate. I desire and deem it best to direct that all these lectures and debates shall be exclusive of theological and party questions, and shall have for their constant object the causes that operate around and within us, and the means necessary and most appropriate to remove the physical and moral evils that afflict our city, our country and humanity.

I desire that these lectures and debates shall always be delivered under a deep and abiding sense of the obligation that rests on all — first, to improve themselves, and then to impart to others a correct knowledge of that believed to be most important, and within man's power to communicate.

To aid the speakers, and those that hear, to profit by these lectures and debates, I hereby direct to have placed in the lecture-room, in a suitable position, full-length likenesses of Washington, Franklin, and Lafayette, with an expression of my sincere and anxious desire that all that behold them may remember that notwithstanding they are dead, they yet speak the language of truth and soberness.

Their lives and words of warning cannot be spurned and neglected without a terrible retribution on us and on our children — such a retribution as will cause their spirits to weep in sorrow over the crumbling ruins of all their brightest hopes for the improvement and renovation of the world.

The glorious yet fearful power

Under a deep sense of the responsibility that rests on us, as a people, entrusted, as we are, with the greatest blessings that ever fell to the lot of man — the glorious yet fearful power of framing and carrying on the government of our choice — it becomes us to remember that this government will be good or evil in proportion as the people of our country become virtuous or vicious. We shall do well to cherish the precept that the righteous (or right doers) are recompensed in the earth, and much more the wicked and the sinner. It will be found that

there is no possible escape from the correction of our Father who is in Heaven, who *"afflicts us not willingly but of necessity, for our profit; by His immutable law that rewards every man according to his works, whether they be good or whether they be evil."*

That students may becom pre-eminen

Desiring, as I do, that the students of this institution may become pre-eminent examples in the practice of all the virtues, I have determined to give them an opportunity to distinguish themselves for their good judgment by annually recommending to the Trustees for adoption, such rules and regulations as they, on mature reflection, shall believe to be necessary and proper, to preserve good morals and good order throughout their connection with this institution.

It is my desire, and I hereby ordain, that a strict conformity to rules deliberately formed by a vote of the majority of the students, and approved by the Trustees, shall forever be an indispensable requisite for continuing to enjoy the benefits of this institution. I now most earnestly entreat each and every one of the students of this institution, through all coming time, to whom I have entrusted this great responsibility of framing laws for the regulation of their conduct in their connection with the institution, and by which any of the members

The great garden we keep

may lose its privileges, to remember how frail we are, and how liable to err when we come to sit in judgment on the faults of others, and how much the circumstances of our birth, our education, and the society and country where we have been born and brought up, have had to do in forming us and making us what we are. The power of these circumstances, when rightly understood, will be found to have formed the great lines of difference that mark the characters of the people of different countries and neighborhoods. And they constitute a good reason for the exercise of all our charity. It is these circumstances that our Creator has given us the power, in some measure, to control. This is the great garden that we are called upon to keep, and to subdue, and have dominion over, in order to find that everything in it *is very good,* that the right use and improvement of everything is a *virtue,* and the wrong or excessive use and perversion of everything, a *sin.* We should always remember that pride and selfishness have ever been the great enemies of mankind. Men, in all ages, have manifested a disposition to cover up their own faults, and to spread out and magnify the faults of others.

I trust that the students of this institution will do something to bear back the might tor-

rent of evils now pressing on the world. I trust that here they will learn to overcome the evils of life with kindness and affection. I trust that here they will find that all true greatness consists in using all the powers they possess to do unto others as they would that others should do unto them; and in this way to become really great by becoming the servant of all.

These great blessings that have fallen to our lot as a people, are entrusted to our care for ourselves and for our posterity, and for the encouragement of suffering humanity throughout the world.

Thirst for knowledge virtue

Feeling this great responsibility, I desire, by all that I can say and by all that I can do, to awaken in the minds of the rising generation an undying thirst for knowledge and *virtue,* in order that they may be able, by wise and honorable measures, to preserve the liberties we enjoy.

Fearing a possibility that my own religious opinions may be called in question, and by some be misunderstood or misrepresented, I feel it to be my duty, in all plainness and simplicity, to state the religious opinions that have taken an irresistible possession of my mind. At the same time, I require, by this instrument and expression of my will, that neither my own religious opinions, nor the religious opinions of

any sect or party *whatever,* shall ever be *made* a *test* or *requirement,* in any *manner* or *form,* of or for *admission to,* or *continuance* to *enjoy* the *benefits of this institution.*

One God and Father

With this qualification, I would then impress, as with the last breath of my life, a fact which I believe to be the most exalting that the mind of man is permitted to contemplate, know, or understand — I mean the ennobling truth that there is one God and Father of all, who is over all and above all — who is forever blessed in the plenitude and fullness of his own infinite perfections; that this God is in very deed *our Father;* that he has created *us* in his own *image* and in his own *likeness;* that we may become one in *spirit,* and *co-workers* with *Him* in all that is good, great and glorious, for *time* and for *eternity.*

What can be more exalting than for the child to behold an infinite parent causing all the elements and essences of the universe to become his ministers — to organize, and individualize, and immortalize undying spirits, capable of knowing Him through an endless progress in knowledge and wisdom and power over the material universe forever; to feel that our Father in heaven has given to *us,* as *individuals, an immortality* and an endless growth, under laws

so wise and good as never to require to be altered, amended, or revoked?

The life he has given us in his wisdom *is* an intelligent life — a life of accountability through our consciences, where every act becomes a part of ourselves, to live in our recollection forever.

I would impress the fact, that our Creator has used the best means possible in our formation or creation, and has given us the world, and all that in it is, with *life* and *breath,* and *all things richly to enjoy*. He has given all these blessings wrapt up in our capacity for an endless improvement and progress in the knowledge of our Creator, and in the power he has bestowed to receive and communicate happiness to all his intelligent creation. So that when we come really to know and feel that our God *is love* — to realize that He *is* indeed the Infinite of all that is good; when we come to see that he is drawing all the elements and activities of the universe into himself, and constantly elaborating them into higher forms of grandeur and beauty, and thus calling every intelligent creature to *wonder,* to *love* and *adore forever.*

In this God I believe

In this God I believe. I believe that he is a Spirit in whom we live, move and have our being; so that, if we ascend into the heavens, he is there, and if we descend into the depths of the

To give increasing happiness

earth, behold! he is there. I believe that he is filling immensity with his presence, comprehending all things within himself, and working all things after the good pleasure of his own will; that he is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever, and *that he changeth not.* I believe that God is love, and that love worketh no ill. I believe that *love must continue to use all its power through all eternity to give ever increasing happiness to all the creatures that he has made.* Such a God I trust I shall come to love with all the heart, soul, might, mind, and strength. I believe that God is so *in all* and *through all;* that what may be known of him is clearly seen, being understood by that which he has made, even his eternal power and Godhead: and that he *is* without variableness or shadow of turning. I believe that he will always work by wise and unalterable laws.

These laws, as far and as fast as they are comprehended by the faculties that he has given us, will be seen to be perfectly consistent and harmonious, and, like the stars in their orbits, "singing forever as they shine — *the hand that made us is divine.*"

With these views, I see as through a glass darkly, all the powers of the *universe* moving in obedience to immutable laws, guiding them

onwards and upwards through all the various developments in the scale of being to a consciousness of God, and an accountability whereby we may show our love to God by the kindness and love that we manifest to the creatures that he has made. I believe that man, to be an accountable being, *must, of necessity,* be intelligent and free. He must feel and know that freedom and ability are given him to do what is required, before he can ever acknowledge it just or right that he should suffer for violating laws and requirements which he had neither the power nor the intelligence to understand or obey. Believing, as I do, that all the material creation centers in, and finds its culminating point in the organization, individualization, and immortalization of free intelligent beings — beings formed to rise through instinct into knowledge, and by knowledge into an accountability to an individual, and an undying conscience, and thence up to God— I believe mankind, throughout the world, require a religion founded on the highest idea that the human mind can form of all that is powerful, wise, pure and good.

Beings formed to rise

Such a religion we have in those principles that guided the life of Christ, by which *he grew in knowledge* and in stature and in *favor* with *God* and *man,* from his youth up, and did

always those things that are well pleasing to his Father and our Father; and by doing to others as he would that others should do to him, was enabled to overcome all evil; and although tempted in all points, as we are, yet he lived without sin. It will always be found to be our highest wisdom to follow his lovely example by avoiding all that is wrong, and by doing what good we can in the world.

A firm and unshaken belief

Mankind will always require the great controlling principle of Christianity to be permanently fixed in the intellectual heart as the guide of life. We need a firm and unshaken belief in the inherent immortality of the soul; we need a solid conviction that God is love — love in action — love universal.

Such a belief in such a God will engage and secure our affections, and forever be to us the great reality of life. Our God will not then be to us a vaporish idea; on the contrary, he will be to us a God filling immensity with his presence and with the glory of his power. Were it possible for us to settle and establish this truth with unwavering certainty in the minds of men, temptation would be powerless. We should then see and feel that punishment inflicted for our good is as much the evidence of parental kindness as the blessings consequent on obedience to a

righteous law. Every day shows me with more clearness that the great garden of the world is spread out before us filled with all the elements and inspirations of God, *"who is all and in all,"* constantly showing us that the same soil that can produce briars and thorns, and vex us in the land wherein we dwell, *can* be subdued by *wisdom,* and made to yield and supply our wants with nature's choicest fruits. How wonderful the wisdom that "connects in this, our greatest virtue, with our greatest bliss," "and makes our own bright prospect to be blest, the strongest motive to assist the rest." Every day shows me that if we are ever saved it must be by overcoming the world of *wrong within us* with such powers and faculties as God has given—to be the true light to enlighten every man that cometh into the world. There is no other *way* whereby we can be saved *but* by ceasing to do evil and learning to do *well.* To do this we need all the helps that we can find — we need to bear each other's burdens, and so fulfill the law of love. The life and teachings of Christ, showing God a father and the world of mankind our brethren, must forever stand pre-eminent over all forms of instruction, either ancient or modern. The loving spirit and principle that Christ manifested in *his* life and in his death, is the

Learning to do well

Knowledge shall cover the earth

spirit that must finally reform the world, in the day when religion shall consist in the right actions and motives of our life, instead of a mere belief in the antiquated opinions of erring men. It was his gentle spirit — the spirit of an all-embracing charity — that went about the world, overcoming the evils of life with continued demonstrations of kindness and affection, and showed all that it is our privilege as well as duty to follow his example and obey his precepts. It was this spirit that was in the world, and the world knew it not. It is still in the world, and it is our unhappiness that we know and feel so little of its influence on our hearts and lives. By following his precepts and example we cannot fail of a happy and useful life, a peaceful death, and a blessed immortality. I trust the time will come when religion will be divorced from superstititon, and the light of science will develop the laws and methods of Deity, showing a great and glorious purpose shining through all the wonders of Almighty power, by which knowledge shall cover the earth as the waters cover the great deep, when men shall know and understand the things on which their happiness depends. We shall then comprehend something of the heights and depths and lengths and breadths of that knowledge and love of God

which passes all understanding.

I have now placed in your hands the entire charge and property of his institution, and in order to further aid and facilitate the objects and purposes designed to be secured, I hereby authorize the Board of Control to draw on me at their pleasure for the sum of ten thousand dollars, as fast as the same can be wisely used to advance the interests of this institution.

Please accept my heartfelt assurance of sincere desire that under your care thousands of the youth of our countrry may throng its halls to learn those lessons of wisdom so much needed to guide the inexperience of youth amidst the dangers to which they are at all times exposed.

Lessons of wisdom

[Signed:]